

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

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R 241236Z AUG 78
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 9363
INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN
AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
USINT BAGHDAD
AMEMBASSY CAIRO
AMCONSUL JERUSALEM
AMEMBASSY JIDDA
AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV
USICA WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 04935

E.O. 11652: XGDS-4
TAGS: PEPR, PROP, SY, US
SUBJECT: SYRIAN INFORMATION OFFICE FOR WASHINGTON

1. SUMMARY: THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES VOTE AGAINST AID TO SYRIA HAS REINFORCED ARGUMENTS OF THOSE WHO WANT GREATER SYRIAN INVESTMENT IN PROPAGANDA EFFORTS ABROAD AND WHO PROPOSE A SYRIAN INFORMATION OFFICE IN WASHINGTON. SOME MEMBERS OF BAATH PARTY REGIONAL AND NATIONAL COMMANDS RESIST THESE EFFORTS TO END SYRIA'S ISOLATION FROM THE WEST. THEY HAVE BEEN FIGHTING A LOSING BATTLE THUS FAR UNDER ASSAD'S PRODDING, BUT CONTINUE TO REPRESENT POWERFUL POLITICAL FORCES WHICH SEEK TO UNDERCUT OUR FRAGILE RELATIONSHIP WITH SYRIA. END SUMMARY.

2. SOME GOOD MAY BE COMING OUT OF HOUSE VOTE AGAINST AID FOR SYRIA. VOTE HAS APPARENTLY SHOCKED SOME SYRIAN
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LEADERS WHO ARE DISTURBED BY IGNORANCE AMONG AMERICANS ABOUT SYRIA'S POLICY AND ACTIONS. TISHRIIN DEPUTY EDITOR GHASSAN RIFAI CLAIMS THAT OFFICIALS RESPONSIBLE FOR INFORMATION IN THE BAATH PARTY ARE NOW FACED WITH PRESSURE FROM AMBASSADOR KABBANI, THE MFA, AND SOME EDITORS TO EXPAND SYRIAN INFORMATION EFFORTS IN THE US POSSIBLY BY OPENING AN INFORMATION OFFICE AT EMBASSY IN WASHINGTON AND PUBLISHING

AN ENGLISH LANGUAGE NEWSPAPER IN DAMASCUS (RIFAI IS INTERESTED IN HEADING THE OFFICE HIMSELF).

3. MFA AMERICAN AFFAIRS DIRECTOR SIAGE SAID HE HAS BEEN PUSHING HARD FOR EXPANDED SYRIAN EFFORTS IN THIS REGARD SINCE THE VOTE. RIFAI SAYS THAT DECISIONS ARE BEING HELD UP BY BAATH PARTY COMMAND MEMBERS WHO HAVE RESPONSIBILITY FOR INFORMATIONAL AND FOREIGN AFFAIRS. (THIS WOULD INCLUDE NATIONAL COMMAND MEMBERS GEORGE SADDEQNI, INDOCTRINATION CULTURAL AFFAIRS; FAWWAZ SAYYAGH, FOREIGN RELATIONS; AND FADIL AL-ANSARI, PROPAGANDA INFORMATION AND PUBLICATIONS AFFAIRS. FONMIN KHADDAM AND INFORMATION MINISTER ISKANDAR AHMAD WOULD ALSO BE INVOLVED IN SUCH A DISCUSSION.)

4. WHILE NOT MENTIONING INDIVIDUALS BY NAME, RIFAI LASHED OUT AT "STUPID" BAATHIS WHO SIT IN THEIR OFFICES READING THEIR OWN PROPAGANDA WITHOUT THE SLIGHTEST IDEA OF WHAT IS GOING ON IN THE WORLD. HE SAID THEY TAKE THE VIEW THAT THE WORLD MUST COME TO THEM TO FIND OUT SYRIA'S POSITION. RIFAI SAID HE HAS HAD SOME FRUSTRATING ARGUMENTS OVER PAST FEW DAYS WITH COMMAND MEMBERS BUT HAD HOPES THAT ACTION WILL BE TAKEN.

5. RIFAI'S FRUSTRATION IS A GOOD REMINDER THAT THERE IS A POLITICALLY POWERFUL GROUP OF BAATHIS WHO PREFER SYRIAN ISOLATION, DO NOT UNDERSTAND THE WEST AND PERHAPS FEAR IT. PRESIDENT ASSAD HAS BEEN MOVING IN THE OPPOSITE DIRECTION
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BUT HE CLEARLY CANNOT MOVE TOO QUICKLY. OUR RELATIONS WITH SYRIA WILL CONTINUE TO SUFFER AS LONG AS MANY MEMBERS OF THE TWO COMMANDS PREFER ISOLATION AND A BAATHI FILTER FOR REALITY. THE COMMANDS HAVE BEEN PERSUADED TO MAKE TENTATIVE STEPS TO OPEN THEIR DOORS, PRIMARILY WITH WESTERN EUROPEAN COUNTRIES BUT ALSO WITH THE US, BUT THERE ARE CERTAINLY SOME AMONG THE COMMAND MEMBERS WHO ARE RESISTING THIS TREND AT EVERY OPPORTUNITY. SEELYE

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